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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 002509

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PINS](#) [RP](#)
SUBJECT: INFORMAL GOVERNMENT-MILF TALKS RESUME DECEMBER 8

REF: A. MANILA 2491 (CHARGES IN MAGUINDANAO MASSACRE)
[1](#)B. MANILA 2429 (SEEKING PEACE AGREEMENT)

Classified By: Ambassador Kristie A. Kenney, reason: 1.4 (b and d).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) The Philippine government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) will continue discussion of measures to protect noncombatants, the role of the International Contact Group, and the prospects for formal negotiations when they meet on December 8 in Kuala Lumpur for informal talks. Philippine Peace Panel Chair Rafael Seguis told the DCM November 27 he hopes to conclude a comprehensive compact with the MILF by March, before upcoming elections make this politically impossible. Both sides' negotiators appear eager for further progress, but focused work and rapid progress will be needed if they are to conclude a compact; even if they fall short, however, continuing progress in forming mechanisms to support the peace process may make it more likely that productive peace talks will continue under the next government. End Summary.

PEACE PANEL CHAIR ON UPCOMING TALKS

[1](#)2. (C) Representatives of the Philippine government and Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) will meet in Kuala Lumpur on December 8 to continue informal talks facilitated by the Malaysian government. According to Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HDC) Country Representative David Gorman, whose organization is a member of the International Contact Group (ICG) for the peace talks, the top priority for the upcoming round is to develop greater clarity on the role of the Civilian Protection Component (CPC) of the International Monitoring Team (IMT). The two sides also will try to schedule a round of formal negotiations, Gorman said. The parties are also likely to discuss contact group modalities. Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) Undersecretary Rafael Seguis, who chairs the government's peace panel, told the DCM on November 27 that he had delayed the upcoming informal talks so they would take place after other states' governments had responded to invitations to join the ICG. (Turkey, the UK and Japan have agreed to join the ICG; Saudi Arabia was also invited, but government contacts told us December 7 the Saudis had not yet responded.)

[1](#)3. (C) Seguis told the DCM he hoped to conclude a comprehensive compact with the MILF no later than March; after that time, it would be politically difficult if not impossible to proceed, as national elections would take place in May. Seguis noted that the government had little room for maneuver in its negotiations with the MILF, given a 2008 Supreme Court ruling that had struck down an earlier comprehensive peace deal. The government might be able to

address MILF demands by delegating some executive branch authorities to local officials, Seguis said, but it could not agree to expand the territory of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). The MILF would argue for such expansion, Seguis explained -- the MILF would claim that Muslim communities would otherwise feel improperly excluded -- but the government would not be able to make this concession, which would be unconstitutional.

14. (C) Addressing the recent massacre in Maguindanao (ref A), Seguis said he believed the clash between the Ampatuan and Mangudadatu clans would have no negative impact on the peace process; it would simply remain a feud between the two prominent and politically powerful Muslim families. He noted that the MILF, which has had an antagonistic relationship with the Ampatuan clan suspected of carrying out the massacre, had cooperated in the massacre followup, informing the GRP where it could find 400 armed supporters of the Ampatuan family.

15. (C) While Seguis acknowledged the success of peace talks remained uncertain, he did take pride in achievements to date. "The best thing we've done," he said, "is to stop the fighting" between rogue MILF elements and the Armed Forces of the Philippines that flared up when the earlier peace deal fell through.

MILF ENTHUSIASTIC, MECHANISMS IMPERFECT

16. (C) Meeting separately with the DCM, Centre for

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Humanitarian Dialogue representative David Gorman acknowledged the difficulties in reaching agreement on a compact, but he believed the MILF was eager to strike a deal.

Gorman assessed that -- in contrast to insurgent communist rebels in the Philippines, who seemed to be waiting for the inauguration of the next administration -- the MILF appeared to prefer dealing with "the devil you know." Gorman said the MILF was committed to working with the Arroyo administration to set down on paper at least the outline of a settlement; this would make it more likely that the peace process would continue along similar lines under the next President.

17. (C) Gorman assessed there were relatively few people in Manila's political class who ardently wanted a peace agreement. Even civil society figures who might naturally appear dovish were not eager to move ahead now; some simply did not trust the Arroyo administration and wanted to deprive this President of a major success.

18. (C) Gorman expressed some apprehension about the ICG's ability to play a constructive role. In its current form, the international contact group was too small to guarantee the parties would adhere to any agreement they might reach, and he was not confident that the ICG would be able to respond appropriately whenever it might first be tested. He noted there would be no formal chair of the ICG; rather, HDC would informally coordinate the group's work. Gorman, who played a key role in developing the ICG, lamented the contact group had become "way too formalized" as the concept had developed. Gorman said he would have favored a less formal group, but the MILF had insisted on a more clearly defined structure.

19. (C) Gorman also was uncertain about the prospects for the civilian protection component of the International Monitoring Team. He questioned how safely foreign NGO officials could work in Mindanao, given the threat posed by kidnap-for-ransom groups. He also worried that, as with similar mechanisms in other countries, residents might turn to the CPC with unrealistic hopes that it could resolve all problems, even those well outside of its mandate.

COMMENT

¶10. (C) Despite the setbacks of 2008 and the proximity of national elections, the government and the MILF have proven able to make meaningful steps forward in the second half of ¶2009. We would not be surprised if upcoming talks result in further progress, but it is far from certain that the parties will be able to conclude a compact under the current administration.

KENNEY